1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

CHAPTER SIX

THE RULES OF KINSHIP AND MARRIAGE

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When a Lepcha speaks of 'we' he generally means all the people of his village. But besides these geographical divisions Lepchas are divided up into other groups by birth and marriage; these groups are the patrilineal clan, or *ptso*, and the immediate and extended family. Unlike their neighbours, the Nepali, the Lepchas have a very small number of kinship terms;[1] fewer even than we have, for they exclude all the category of cousins, and, except for the mother's brothers, make no distinction between the paternal and maternal lines. For people younger than the speaker, too, they do not make any distinction of sex; the same word is used for a younger brother or a younger sister, for a son or a daughter, for a nephew or a niece. Only in the case of children's spouses are different words used for son-in-law and daughter-in-law.

Old age is considered by the Lepchas to be a desirable quality; the polite term of address to anybody you are not related to is 'old man'; and there is a tendency to push anybody older than the speaker into a higher generation. Thus, when a man has had a child he calls his wife's parents 'grandfather' and 'grandmother', and the parents call their own elder brothers and sisters 'father' and 'mother'; the wife's elder brother, or her elder sister's husband (and conversely) are equated with her father. The opposite tendency is also manifested towards the wives of younger brothers (the elder brother calls them 'daughters-in-law') and the husbands of younger sisters (the elder sister calls them 'sons-in-law'). In the joint family which dwells under a single roof only nine terms are normally used: 'grandfather', 'grandmother,' 'father',

[1] A complete list of Lepcha kinship terms and other common forms of address are given in Appendix II.

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881 through ritual and symbolism men attempt to arrogate to themselves women's physiological functions; perhaps the most striking of these rites is the urethral sub-incision practised by some Australian tribes. Since, unfortunately, nothing is known of the other Mongolian peoples of the Himalayas, it is impossible to state whether this notion is peculiar to the Lepchas, or whether it is shared by their Northern neighbours. The Hindus and the Nepali converts to Hinduism stress overtly the rivalry between the sexes, and adduce the inferiority of women through their magically dangerous and infectious functions of menstruation and child-birth.

886 Just as there is no formally marked beginning of sexual life, so there is no formally marked end of it. The menopause is ignored; the dream of copulation with a supernatural, which marks the menses, is meant to continue after it; and sexual pleasure is considered to be equally strong at any period of life. There appears to be no fear of impotence; sexual appetite and an appetite for food are openly equated, and it is considered that, except through illness or old age, the loss of one is as unlikely as the loss of the other.

833 Some men make a distinction between pre-puberty and post-puberty sexual activity, but this distinction is personal and not cultural. Most men, when talking of their past lives, emphasise what was their first 'real' sexual experience; but some place this first experience very early, at the age of eleven or twelve. I think the operative distinction in the mind of the Lepcha is whether the sexual adventure formed part of a play, or was undertaken seriously for its own sake.

582 584 [833] Lepcha society gives the children a sexual rôle very early; girls are betrothed and occasionally married from the age of eight onwards, and boys from the age of twelve. In Lingthem it seems as though this very early age for betrothal has been somewhat raised in recent years; Mrs. Datoop and one or two other of the elder women in the community were betrothed at the age of eight and married shortly after; but in 1937 there was no betrothed girl aged less than twelve, nor was any young man betrothed to a girl under that age. It is quite probable that this change in the age of betrothal is local and temporary; the Lepchas did not consider that the situation had altered in any way. Even today most young people are betrothed before or at any rate as soon as they arrive at physical puberty, and consequently enter that state with an already selected sexual partner. In 1937 the only unbetrothed girl over thirteen was Prumtu; there were eight boys over sixteen un-

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

knew that his daughter (now aged twelve) was having relations with a man; but he would not like her to give birth to a bastard, on account of the possible harm to the crops. Neither he nor his wife has spoken to her on the subject, nor is this ever done. Incidentally, it may be noted that the swelling of a young girl's breasts is not thought to be a sign of puberty, for which there is indeed no special name, but an indication that she has commenced to have sexual relations.

Masturbation is not, of course, unknown, but is seldom indulged in by reason of the fact that women are available from the earliest moment that a boy feels the need of sex. The general opinion is that it is slightly silly and rather funny.

The average married Lepcha has sexual relations with his wife at least once every night, but abstinence is thought to cause no harm, and indeed makes one fat and healthy. It should be noted, however, that abstinence is interpreted as meaning having sexual relations only once in every three or four days. Tafoor now considers himself a very continent man, but says that when he first married he usually copulated with his wife seven or eight times every night. In his opinion men are not much interested in the sexual act after the age of sixty or sixty-five; but women continue to take pleasure in the operation up to the time they die. The menopause seems to be hardly recognised and certainly does not result in any sort of psychological disturbance such as seems to be common among European women. It is realised that after a certain age women cease to conceive, but there is no break in their sexual activities. It may be that because of this no attempt is made to restrain the sex life of the young; for since there is no break in the sex life of the parents the question of jealousy, once again, does not arise, as I believe it does in our own civilisation. But this is a matter for the psychologists to decide.

Contraception is unknown; nor are aphrodisiacs in general use. It is said, however, that the flesh of a bird called *Ken fo*,